

Fictional Texts as Sites of Knowledge: From Intertexts to Transtextuality

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Many fictional characters in Chinese literature are avid readers of literary prose, poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. This establishes a distinct web of texts, and thus patterns of intertextuality. Their reading acts often characterize these fictional characters. In literary texts produced after 1949, they are positioned clearly within the ideological framework set up by the literary dogma of the CCP. This dogma called upon the readers of fiction to emulate literary heroes. Using this as a starting point, I analyze the short story “Banzhuren” (The Class Teacher) by Liu Xinwu, published shortly after the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). The multitude of texts read and discussed within this piece of fiction clearly locates the story within the literary and intellectual cosmos of the time. Moreover, the intertexts transform the story into a site where literary knowledge is debated, contested, and produced. Reading acts thus produce a site of knowledge within the fictional narrative. The short story offers interpretations of the intertexts and attains distinct meaning through the various texts referred to and discussed. At the same time, the interpretations of these intertexts mirror how the readers of “Banzhuren” may have perceived them. The short story and the texts referred to form what I call a “transtextual space.” Taking into account the fictional nature of the text, I argue that this particular type of transtextuality creates distinct imaginary spaces.

*Introduction*¹

In his examination of *lieux de savoir*, the French historian Christian Jacob rightly points out that knowledge “is not purely ideal” and does not “exist by itself.” Rather, “it is always embedded in artifacts or embodied in individuals, communities, or institutions.”² Artifacts can be drawings, texts, books, or various other things in which knowledge is written down, ordered, and presented. This materialization of knowledge is essential for the production and circulation of knowledge. Social and

1 This paper has been developed as part of the ERC-funded project “The Politics of Reading in the People’s Republic of China” (READCHINA, Grant agreement No. 757365/SH5: 2018–2023). I would like to thank the READCHINA team (Eve Y. Lin, Damian Mandzowski, Duncan Paterson, and Lara Y. Yang), Nicolai Volland, Martin Hofmann, and the anonymous reviewer for their careful reading of the different versions of this paper.

2 Jacob 2017, p. 87.

spatial practices thus determine how knowledge is created and circulated, and how it is adapted, altered, and advanced in the process. Similar to Jacob, the geographer David N. Livingstone argues for a geography of reading. He proposes a methodology that pays attention to “spaces of textual circulation,”³ spaces of reading as “sites of textual hybridity,”⁴ the creation of “cartographies of textual reception,”⁵ and the construction of a “cultural geography of reading.”⁶

The attention devoted to the circulation of texts mirrors deliberations in the fields of comparative and world literature. Literary texts become world literature through concrete movement across geographical space. World literature is therefore defined by the literary scholar David Damrosch as texts that, in traveling beyond their culture of origin, “gain in translation.”⁷ Recent research emphasizes that world literature should not be equated with literature circulating in English, and thereby gaining a global reach. Rather, starting from the multilingual contexts of South Asia, Francesca Orsini proposes the concept of a “significant geography ... that texts, authors, and language communities inhabit, produce, and reach, which typically extend outward without (ever?) having a truly global reach.”⁸ These geographies are defined as significant due to their “trajectories and imaginaries that are *recurrent* and/or that *matter* to actors and texts.”⁹ Texts, we learn from Orsini and her colleagues, are always embedded within distinct contexts of production, circulation, consumption, and reception. These contexts, in turn, have a distinct impact on which, and how, knowledge is produced and interpreted in distinct cultural settings.

The book as a material artifact is one of the objects through which knowledge is created. I define knowledge in very broad terms, ranging from basic factual information about a subject, to interpretations of natural, social, political, or cultural phenomena. The pages of a book become the sites on which knowledge is presented and ordered in distinct ways, thereby informing practices of knowledge circulation. While this is evident for books presenting *factual* texts, such as those discussed by Jacob, I am proposing incorporating *fictional* texts into this model as well. While

3 Livingstone 2005, p. 393.

4 Livingstone 2005, p. 393.

5 Livingstone 2005, p. 394.

6 Livingstone 2005, p. 395.

7 Damrosch 2003, pp. 281–303.

8 Laachir, Marzagora, and Orisini 2018a, p. 294; see also Laachir, Marzagora, and Orisini 2018b.

9 Laachir, Marzagora, and Orisini 2018a, p. 294; emphasis in original.

Franco Moretti has elaborated on the significance of geographical information in the creation of abstract models of fictional texts,¹⁰ I propose considering the role of reading within the production of knowledge and the production of sites of knowledge (*lieux de savoir*). Reading attains significance as it represents the conscious or unconscious acquisition of knowledge from textual artifacts as sites of knowledge, and sometimes also within a concrete space dedicated to knowledge, such as a classroom or a library.

Fictional characters are sometimes portrayed as reading. In *How the Steel was Tempered*, the Soviet classic of socialist realism by Nikolai Ostrovsky (1904–1936), for example, the protagonist Pavel Korchagin names Ethel Voynich's (1864–1960) *The Gadfly* as the source of inspiration for his own heroic deeds. Such depictions may serve as a short-cut to the characterization of a fictional persona, or as a means of reflecting upon the nature and role of writing and reading literature. Similarly, numerous characters in Chinese fiction are portrayed as readers of prose, fiction, or poetry. Such fictional readers appear across a wide range of texts, from the classical novel *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 (The Dream of the Red Chamber)¹¹ to Lu Xun's 鲁迅 (1881–1936) "Kuangren riji" 狂人日记 (A Madman's Diary, 1918), from PRC classics like Yang Mo's 杨沫 (1914–1995) *Qingchun zhi ge* 青春之歌 (Song of Youth, 1958) and Ouyang Shan's 欧阳山 (1908–2000) *San jia xiang* 三家巷 (Three Family Lane, 1959) to science fiction such as Wei Yahua's 魏雅华 (b. 1949) "Wo jueding yu jiqiren qizi lihun" 我决定与机器人妻子离婚 (Conjugal Happiness in the Arms of Morpheus, 1981) or Ma Boyong's (b. 1949) 马伯庸 "Jijing zhi cheng" 寂静之城 (The City of Silence, 2005), to unofficial handwritten entertainment fiction from the Cultural Revolution¹² or a piece of scar literature (*shanghen wenxue* 伤痕文学, or literature of the wounded) from the immediate aftermath of the Cultural Revolution: "Banzhuren" 班主任 (The Class Teacher, Nov. 1977)¹³ by Liu Xinwu 刘心武 (b. 1942).¹⁴

10 Moretti 2007.

11 In research about intertextuality in *Honglou meng*, the focus is on the ancient myths and texts that have influenced the author of the novel, rather than concrete reading acts in the plot; see, for example, Wang 1992.

12 For an overview of the literary field during the Cultural Revolution, see Henningsen 2019. I discuss reading acts in this genre in Henningsen 2021.

13 Liu Xinwu 1977. For an English translation, see Liu Xinwu 1995.

14 For an evaluation of Liu Xinwu's literary oeuvre of the late 1970s and the 1980s, see Himmelstein 1997.

These texts, I argue, can be seen as both concrete sites of knowledge and as a point of entry into imaginary spaces of knowledge. As sites of knowledge, they provide their readers with information about and interpretations of other texts, which were unknown, or, if they were known, not readily available to readers at the time, as was common during the Cultural Revolution and its early aftermath. Through these texts-read-within-fictional-texts, new knowledge may be introduced to readers or created through distinct interpretations of the text. A page of fiction thus turns into a *lieu de savoir*. On a different level, these readings in fictional texts may open up an imaginary realm, or space, as readers are invited to follow the characters into their worlds and their readings of other texts. The texts thus create imaginary, or virtual, spaces.

In this paper, I focus on one exemplary text, the short story “Banzhuren,” which belongs to the canon of post-Mao scar literature and contains references to no less than 14 book titles. Some of these are mentioned in passing or as a shorthand characterization of the respective character. Others are discussed among the characters or inscribed into the narrative pattern of the story. “Banzhuren,” I suggest, can thus be read as a debate among the fictional characters on the role and value of literature. I therefore conceptualize the short story as a site of knowledge. I argue, however, that the model can also be applied to other stories, to other genres, and to other eras. The focus on a story as a site of knowledge can yield fruitful findings beyond the national realm. The geographical coordinates of the reading materials referred to position the story distinctly on a map of world literature. These reading materials and reading acts provide readers of the story with knowledge about other (literary) texts and possible interpretations thereof. In their international scope, they also bring a transcultural and what I term transtextual dimension to the text. The transcultural dimension opens a perspective that may illustrate how cultural products are reinterpreted as they move or are moved from one culture to the next. This is particularly the case for literature-turned-world literature with texts gaining in translation—and, we may add, through reading. The “trans” in transcultural thus points to that which is gained through these processes of circulation. Transculturality is also an invitation to question and deconstruct the borders of cultures or identities.

In this paper, I understand transtextuality as derived from transculturality. Gérard Genette uses transtextuality as the superordinate term for the concepts of intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, architextuality, and his notion of hypertextuality.¹⁵ Differing from this, I want to highlight a textual quality that is more than the sum of

15 Genette 1993, pp. 9–18.

the meanings of the fictional text and the text(s) referred to therein. I argue that the inclusion of one text within another impacts back on the understanding and interpretation of both texts. “Trans” in transtextuality thus refers to that which is gained through these references. So, while “Banzhuren” is clearly rooted in the historical and geographical context of the aftermath of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the intertextual references are transtextual and transcultural. As a result, distinct “significant geographies” open up these literary sites of knowledge to imaginative and imaginary spaces. To elaborate these arguments, I will develop this paper with an overview of the text, the context of its publication, and its standard evaluation in literary history; I will then turn to the texts read and discussed by the characters in this short story, before returning to consider transtextuality and the production of imaginary spaces.

“Banzhuren”: Text and Context

“Banzhuren,” first published in *People’s Literature* (*Renmin wenxue* 人民文学) in 1977, is one of the central texts of the scar literature genre.¹⁶ These short stories were written and published in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution and are credited as being the first literary assessment of the “wounds,” the hardships, suffering, and traumas inflicted by the Cultural Revolution. These texts name the wounds, and give the individual the right to state what she or he suffered, yet the genre in itself is still slightly formulaic and does not move beyond the confines of what was politically acceptable. The stories always end on a positive, optimistic note, and while the suffering of the individual (and sometimes the question of the guilt of the individual) are named, responsibility for everything that went wrong is invariably attributed to the “Gang of Four” (*siren bang* 四人帮), thereby exempting the recently deceased Mao Zedong and the political system from any moral guilt or political responsibility. Scar literature thus plays into the larger debates (and changing policies) about how to deal with the atrocities committed during the Cultural Revolution, and how to attribute accountability and to whom.¹⁷ Despite its formulaic nature, however, close readings of scar literature point to elements of openness and ambivalence in the stories. Scar literature is thus not just a reinforcement of the Four Modernizations (*si ge xiandaihua* 四个现代化) or a final verdict on the Cultural Revolution. Rather, ambiguities in the

16 For an overview of scar literature, see Knight 2016.

17 For more on these debates, see, for example, the contributions in the edited volume by Leese and Engman 2018; Cook 2016; Leese 2014.

texts could point to interpretations that differ from the official line,¹⁸ which also explains the popularity of the texts at the time. My reading of “Banzhuren” supports this as it also notes ambivalences in dealing with and making use of the Maoist past.

“Banzhuren” narrates how, in the spring of 1977, Song Baoqi, a young student referred to as a hoodlum or hooligan (*liumang* 流氓), is transferred into the class of Teacher Zhang, the protagonist of the story. Teacher Zhang has to cope with the reservations of his colleagues and his students (and their families) about welcoming Song into the class. The narrative introduces various teachers and students, and their different outlooks on Song, as well as their divergent political and ideological positions.

These positions are reflected in the reading acts of the protagonists, both in the texts they decide to read, and how they interpret them. Given the amount of reading and the intensity of the related discussions that take place within the narrative, the short story could be taken as a debate about the status and value of literature at the end of the Mao era. The short story is thus clearly a site where extant literary and ideological knowledge is contested and new knowledge is produced, challenging the Maoist literary dogma. Ever since Mao Zedong’s 1942 Yan’an talks, literature and the arts had been subordinated to the politics of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Convinced of the educational function of literature, authors were called upon to create literary heroes as models for readers to emulate in their everyday lives.¹⁹ As a consequence, literature from the era of high Maoism²⁰ features heroes conforming to the Three Prominences (*san tuchu* 三突出), i.e., prominence is given to positive characters; among this group, prominence is given to heroic characters; and among this group, prominence is given to the main heroic character. Accordingly, the main hero of a story stands out from the secondary heroes, the broad masses, and the class enemies.²¹

As a consequence, practices of emulating literary heroes emerged, or what I call practices of “normative reading.” Texts read (no matter whether fictional or factual)

18 Chen 2020, pp. 29–37.

19 Wagner 1992; Wagner 1995.

20 High Maoism here refers to the later period of high socialism in China (defined as the period from the mid-1950s to 1980 in Brown and Johnson 2015, pp. 6–7), i.e., from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s. I use this term to emphasize the dominance of Mao Zedong within the entire political system and within popular imagination, brought about by power struggles and the carefully orchestrated Mao cult.

21 Huang 1973, King 2013, Yang 1998, and van Fleit Hang 2013 are seminal works on the literature created within the confines of the Maoist literary dogma. For the mode of operation of the socialist literary system in China, see Link 2000.

were not just vaguely inspirational for their readers; rather, they were believed to provide clear guidance in life. Autobiographical sources about Cultural Revolution experiences indicate that even among sent-down youth highly critical of the regime, patterns of normative reading were still widespread.²² “Banzhuren” challenges and plays with the patterns of normative reading, as the following analysis of the reading acts in the text demonstrate.

Reading Acts and the Production of a Site of Knowledge

I define reading acts as people’s interactions with texts, including the actual reading of a text, but also the discussion of a text, the borrowing of a book, and much more. Reading acts, in this sense, differ markedly from the model of “Acts of Reading” (*Leseakte*) established by Wolfgang Iser, which focuses on implicit readers and thus works as a literary theory that has as its object the text and its narrative structure.²³ In contrast, I conceptualize reading acts as what actual people do with texts and how they interact with the material artifacts on which texts are circulated, how they read, interpret, and meaningfully integrate their reading into their own lives.²⁴ Reading acts thus have a cognitive as well as an affective component and they are always connected to the concrete historical conditions under which they take place, regardless of whether a real-life reading act or a fictional reading act is at the center of the analysis.

In the context of Maoist and early post-Maoist China, reading acts can be understood within the framework of normative reading. Reading acts performed by fictional characters can be meaningfully incorporated into this model: if a literary hero is to be emulated by readers, then, we may assume, readers should take his or her literary preferences also as a model. A literary character’s musing about the meaning of a text thus would claim normative status. The effect of the (suggested) normativity of a text may be even stronger if the text referred to is not readily available to the reader, because he or she does not possess it and cannot check the original himself or herself. Whenever fictional reading acts have a named title as their object (as opposed to an unspecified reference to the reading of “a novel” or “a poem”), they point to an inter-textual relationship, similar to a quotation / citation or an allusion, as specified by

22 Henningsen 2021, chapter five; Henningsen 2020.

23 Iser 1976.

24 Reading acts from both autobiographical and fictional sources are collected in and available through the ReadAct database. See Paterson and Henningsen 2020.

Genette: they highlight the presence of one text inside another.²⁵ Referring to a textual source outside the text may impact on the real-life reader's interpretation of the text at hand. I argue that within the framework of normative reading, reading acts related to actual texts represent a particular form of intertextuality. The focus on the interaction of persons with texts points in two directions, to the plot and, potentially, to the lives of the readers of the text. The text read by a fictional character impacts on that character's life. The fictional character's evaluation and interpretation of the text (which at least in Maoist and early post-Maoist China was likely unavailable to readers of the fictional text) translates into a normative view of that very text. The fictional reading act thus produces knowledge using the pages of a fictional text as a site of knowledge.

The texts read in "Banzhuren" point to a wide literary cosmos. Most of these texts emerge from the realm of socialist cosmopolitanism that dominated the Chinese literary field before the start of the Cultural Revolution,²⁶ but a few texts are also from classical European literature and premodern Chinese literature. These readings are listed here in the order of their first appearance in the narrative:

- *The Gadfly* by Ethel Voynich;
- *Qingchun zhi ge* by Yang Mo, one of the most successful novels during the early years of the PRC;
- *How the Steel was Tempered* by Nikolai Ostrovsky, which uses *The Gadfly* as a central text of reference and was central to both the entire literary cosmos in socialist China and to the model of normative reading;²⁷
- *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910);
- *Hongyan* 红岩 (The Red Crag), a second influential socialist realist novel of Chinese origin by Luo Guangbin 罗广斌 (1924–1967) and Yang Yiyan 杨益言 (1925–2017);
- *Xin Jiaxuan cixuan* 辛稼轩词选 (Selected Poems by Xin Jiaxuan);
- writings by Marx, Lenin, and Mao, including *The Communist Manifesto* and *The Three Origins and Three Components of Marxism*;
- *Baofeng zhouyu* 暴风骤雨 (Hurricane) a third Chinese socialist realist novel by Zhou Libo's 周立波 (1908–1979);

25 Genette 1993, p. 10.

26 Volland 2017.

27 On the influence of *How the Steel was Tempered* on the Chinese literary field, see Gamsa 2010, chapter 4; Green 2017; Wagner 1995; Yu 2002.

- *Mao Dun wenxuan* 矛盾文集 (Collected Works by Mao Dun);
- *Gaidar wenxuan* 盖达尔选集 (Selected Works of Gaidar);
- *Eugenie Grandet* by Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850);
- *Tangshi sanbai shou* 唐诗三百首 (Three Hundred Tang Poems);
- and the Soviet children's story "The Watch" by Leonid Panteleyev which narrates the story of a young hoodlum or "street urchin" being reintegrated into society; readers of the story learn about the circumstances of his earlier misconduct and his underlying good character.

The texts referenced in the narrative of "Banzhuren" firmly anchor the story in late 1970s China. While these texts stem from different eras, geographical regions, and ideological provenances, autobiographical sources about the Cultural Revolution document that even though copies of the texts were scarce, some of them circulated and were widely read during the 1970s. *How the Steel was Tempered*, for instance, was never banned entirely. In life writing about the 1970s, the novel is referred to as a source of inspiration and as reading material that moved individual readers. However, these readings became ambivalent, and readers interpreted them not with an eye to emulating the protagonist's heroism, but, rather, in line with a general sense of disillusionment.²⁸ Three texts are central to an understanding of "Banzhuren," as they are discussed at length and firmly integrated into the narrative: *The Gadfly*, *How the Steel was Tempered* and "The Watch." These three are not only prominent within the plot of the short story, but also enjoyed significant circulation during the transition period of the late 1970s and early 1980s. *The Gadfly* and *How the Steel was Tempered* were both read extensively during the Cultural Revolution, as autobiographical accounts testify.²⁹ Moreover, all three intertexts and "Banzhuren" itself were adapted as comic books (*lianhuanhua* 连环画) between 1972 and 1980, thus making the texts available to a broader readership. The other texts are mentioned as earlier readings of the characters, but not discussed. While this makes them less prominent in the narrative, the range of titles identifies the story's fictional characters as avid readers. The brief references to these texts also suggest they had at least a certain relevance to the literary and intellectual field of the time. "Banzhuren" can therefore be read as a fictional literary debate on these existing titles, as well as on the status and role of literature in late 1970s China. The literary text thus becomes a site where knowledge is produced and shared in the reading act(s) through the voices of the different protagonists.

28 Henningsen 2020; Paterson and Henningsen 2020.

29 I elaborate on this in chapter five of Henningsen 2021.

In the short story, Xie Huimin, the Youth League Secretary of the class, is described as an honest, albeit naïve young girl who more or less blindly follows the Party's teachings but refuses to think independently. To her, both *The Song of Youth*—which features a love story during the time of revolutionary struggle and a heroine who is herself an avid reader—and *The Gadfly* are obscene books.³⁰ In her view, *The Gadfly* is particularly obscene because of its foreign origin and its illustrations, whilst Teacher Zhang (who read the book earlier in his life and found it to be meaningful) disagrees, and her classmate Shi Hong reads the book open-mindedly and considers it an exciting book that is worth reading. In fact, Shi Hong is in the process of reading *How the Steel was Tempered* and thus becomes curious to learn more about its intertextual engagement with *The Gadfly*. *How the Steel was Tempered* tells the story of Pavel Korchagin, an underprivileged youth growing up in poverty with ties to leftist circles who turns into a hero who forsakes romantic love and is willing to sacrifice his life for the sake of the revolution. Pavel notes that the source of his inspiration is *The Gadfly*—the story of a young man in 19th century Italy who fights against the monarchy and the Catholic church and willingly sacrifices love and life for the republic.

Within the plot of “Banzhuren,” the ambivalent status of *The Gadfly* emerges because a torn copy of the book is found among the belongings of the “hooligan” Song Baoqi. The materiality of this copy is important. In addition to its damaged state, illustrations depicting the heroine of the novel have mustaches drawn on them. Teacher Zhang wonders whether Song and his friends have read the book as an obscene book like Xie Huimin, and whether they have misinterpreted a text that enjoyed official endorsement before the Cultural Revolution as titillation. The fact that in Song's copy of the book, the illustrations have mustaches, a clearly *male* “accessory,” added to the face of the foreign *woman* might suggest a transgressive reading, thus, perhaps, proving Song's wrong, bourgeois state of mind. Teacher Zhang also realizes that Xie Huimin needs to learn not to think in black and white: she should differentiate between life and art, which can contain both treasures and trash. At this point in the story, Teacher Zhang thus calls into question a literary model that aims to provide simple answers and unambiguous guidance for life.

Song Baoqi's reading of *The Gadfly* is rather different from that of his future classmates and teacher, as Teacher Zhang learns soon after. Misspelling its title, Song only vaguely remembers the book, which he never finished reading as he was unable to comprehend it. In fact, he and his friends stole it, together with a number of other

30 Liu Xinwu 1977, p. 20.

titles, from the library of their school in order to sell them, thus mirroring real-life practices during the turbulent years of the Cultural Revolution. Breaking into the libraries that were closed at the time was one of the ways of attaining reading materials, as several authors report in their autobiographies.³¹ Fearing arrest, Song Baoqi and his friends subsequently decided against selling the books and just played around with them, thus using the text in ways not intended by author or publisher. Each of the friends took a book with illustrations and drew mustaches on the faces of the women in a competition to see who could draw most and thus would be the most fortunate of them, thus using the books as fortune-telling devices.³² Learning about this, Teacher Zhang ponders the state of Chinese society and the underlying reasons for both the narrow-mindedness of politically correct students like Xie and for the objectionable lifestyle of a “hooligan” like Song. Why, Zhang asks, were such valuable books declared “poisonous weeds” and locked away? What kind of threat did they pose? Could it be that *not* reading valuable books was the root of the young generation’s disorientation? Realizing this, a wave of anger surges up in Teacher Zhang as the story takes a turn into the obligatory blaming of the “Gang of Four” and Zhang exclaims: “Save the children entrapped by the ‘Gang of Four’!” 救救被 “四人帮” 坑害了的孩子!³³

This sentence is not just an emotional outburst by a devoted teacher, it is also an intertextual link to Lu Xun’s “Kuangren rijì,” credited as the foundational text of modern Chinese literature. The story can be read as a critical assessment of traditional Chinese culture, which is described as cannibalistic. To the madman, only the children are innocent as they have not yet eaten their fellow humans’ flesh, so he ends his account: “Are there still children who haven’t eaten humans? Save the children ...” 没有吃过人的孩子，或者还有？救救孩子... Teacher Zhang’s use of the well-known trope aligns itself, first of all, with May-Fourth discourses about the future of the country. In this reading of Lu Xun’s trope, the children who have not been contaminated by inhuman cultural traditions are turned into the bearers of hope for a better future. By implication, the actions of the “Gang of Four” are equated with all that is negative about traditional Chinese culture, and the culture of the Cultural Revolution is declared to be cannibalistic—despite, or, more likely, because of its explicit leftist radicalism and anti-traditionalism. By implication, through this return to one of the

31 See, for example, Han Shaogong 2009, pp. 564–566.

32 Liu Xinwu 1977, p. 23.

33 Liu Xinwu 1977, p. 24.

founding texts of modern Chinese literature, “Banzhuren” lays claim to its own distinct literary value as an important reflection on contemporary Chinese society and culture.

The juxtaposition of Song Baoqi’s physical interaction with his stolen copy of *The Gadfly* (a foreign literary text that was formative for the canon of socialist fiction) and the teacher’s exclamation, which alludes to the founding text of modern Chinese fiction, turns “Banzhuren” into a particular site of knowledge. Ambivalence is inscribed into the story through the physical and ephemeral, material, and aesthetic pleasures of interacting with texts. Ambivalence further enters through attempts by individual characters to make claims based on their own subjective position towards the respective text.

The story also refers to Lu Xun at a second important junction in the last chapter.³⁴ In order to solve the conflict in the class and to overcome the antagonism against Song Baoqi, Shi Hong has taken the initiative and organized a reading of the Soviet children’s story about a delinquent young street urchin, “The Watch” by Panteleyev. Lu Xun is explicitly mentioned in “Banzhuren” as the translator of the story who translated it with “great ardor” (*juda de reqing* 巨大的热情),³⁵ which underscores the authority of “The Watch.” Through the students’ interaction with and discussion of the text, the parallels between their own situation and that of the Soviet story become obvious, as well as the ambivalence of their situation and of their attempts to evaluate and compare Song Baoqi with the fictional character of the street urchin. Once they gain more knowledge about the respective backgrounds of the two hooligans, the students realize that neither of the two can be easily declared an outright bad character. Reading a literary text, once again, serves as a guide for one’s own behavior.

Through the voice of Teacher Zhang, Liu Xinwu calls into question (literary) heroes modeled after texts such as *How the Steel was Tempered*. Zhang also questions the moral and ideological demands imposed on real persons during the Cultural Revolution. He advocates independent thinking but does so in a way that confirms the model of normative reading. He resolves to use guided reading activities to train his students in independent thinking—as is undertaken with “The Watch”—to help both Xie Huimin and Song Baoqi. Cherishing the values of good literature is thus a confirmation of the model of normative reading demanding that literature serve as a guiding tool both for ordinary readers and authors of literary texts. Just as Teacher Zhang

34 Liu Xinwu 1977, pp. 27–29.

35 Liu Xinwu 1977, p. 28.

makes plans for future guided reading activities with the students in his class to eliminate the negative influence of the “Gang of Four” and to turn his students into open-minded and independent students (who are thus able to contribute even better to socialist construction), Liu Xinwu took “The Watch” as the blueprint for his own literary creation, using it for his purposes as it serves as a model for the plot, interpretation of the plot, and evaluation of the short story itself.

Beyond the Site: Transtextuality and the Production of Imaginary Spaces

Through references to literary works from other parts of the world, in particular through the reading acts elaborated in the short story, “Banzhuren” attains a clearly transcultural dimension. This positions the characters, and through them the entire story, on a global literary map, including modern and premodern texts, texts from the world of socialist cosmopolitanism, and texts from Western literary traditions beyond the canon established by the literary dogma of the CCP. The short story thus turns into a site of knowledge that maps, evaluates, and thus produces knowledge about world literature. As a site of knowledge about world literature, “Banzhuren” inhabits a distinct “significant geography [...], albeit] without [...] a truly global reach.”³⁶ The story in itself is bound to the Chinese context of its production and first circulation, and to the historical and literary background of the aftermath of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. However, the “significant geography” is produced through the texts read, many of them of foreign origin but adapted to the Chinese literary field at the time.³⁷ In this way, “Banzhuren” is positioned within transcultural circuits of literary exchange, albeit with the canon of socialist cosmopolitanism dominating. This production of a “significant geography” in the text rests on the fact that, as readers, the fictional characters in the story are “poaching” texts of world literature. With this poaching, Michel de Certeau refers to how readers generate meaning from texts through their reading. Meaning is not produced by the author, but by the readers of texts who wander through the text and integrate their reading into their own previous (reading) experiences. In de Certeau’s reasoning, authorial intention is a strategy,

36 Laachir, Marzagora, and Orisini 2018a, p. 294.

37 Even a text like Zhou Libo’s *Baofeng zhoubu*, a socialist realist novel authored by a Chinese author, has distinct foreign roots as it is modeled after *Virgin Soil Upturned*, which Zhou had translated earlier in his life. See Volland 2017, pp. 39–61.

while readers' responses to texts represent their tactics as they wander through the landscape of the text.³⁸

The concept of "poaching" can be applied not only to actual readers (as de Certeau does), but to fictional readers as well. Fictional readers poach other (literary) texts, in this case *The Gadfly*, either by ascribing them transgressive intentions like Xie Huimin does, by using them for a fortune-telling game like Song Baoqi (drawing mustaches in order to see who will win and be the luckiest), or by declaring the novel a valuable work of literature like Teacher Zhang and Shi Hong. This may, at first, be seen as the attempt of an authorial voice to reclaim authority over the interpretation of texts, to establish its own interpretation of the texts discussed and by extension to establish its own interpretation of the short story itself, which is then interpreted through the texts read or intertextually referred to within the narrative. The text(s) referred to thus hover(s) above the target text, adding layer upon layer of meaning to it. However, if poaching is taken seriously, then reading acts in fictional texts similarly impact the intertexts that appear in relation to reading acts. This privileges the target text (the fictional text) as the site for the production of knowledge about the texts read, discussed, or otherwise referred to. The target text, moreover, makes claims about the contents, relevance, and meaning of the various intertexts. These intertexts are thus read from a distinct perspective, as the example discussed here exemplifies: through the debate in the "Banzhuren," it is first suggested that *The Gadfly* is an obscene text, which is then refuted. The relation of text and intertext is even more complex in the case of "The Watch", which is presented as a model for how to deal with problematic youngsters (and there were many after the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution). "The Watch" appears in two types of textual relationships, as defined by Genette. The first is an intertextual relationship, as it is mentioned and discussed at length by the protagonists of "Banzhuren." Within the framework of normative reading propagated in Maoist China, this textual relationship mirrors how the youngsters in the story rework their attitude towards their new classmate. This also calls upon actual readers of the story to emulate the protagonists. Second, "The Watch" has a hypertextual relationship (within Genette's theory) with "Banzhuren" as the latter can be seen as modeled on the former. This relationship emphasizes the importance attributed to the "model" text, and it also points out that "The Watch" is attributed high authority within the "significant geography" of "Banzhuren."

38 De Certeau 1984, pp. 165–176.

Thus, references to intertexts, and in particular the reading of texts in fictional texts, add a new layer of meaning to the respective piece of fiction. At the same time, they also impact on how the intertext itself is being read and interpreted, both within a fictional text and beyond. As intertext and target text attribute meaning to each other, they can both be located in what I term transtextual space. Through reading acts, the fictional text creates a distinct “significant geography.”

Within the fictional space of “Banzhuren,” Lu Xun—arguably the highest literary authority in modern China—and the novel *The Gadfly*—core reading material from the Maoist era—come to condemn the policies of the “Gang of Four” and to usher in the reform policy of the “Four Modernizations.” They also serve to make an argument for the importance and value of reading. They are thus updated for the new era. Representative of late 1970s literature and 1970s reading practices more generally, “Banzhuren” manifests the capacity of reading materials to create transtextual spaces of knowledge and reveals how these spaces come into being: Teacher Zhang and the students only discuss an abstract notion of the *The Gadfly*, as their discussion does not focus on the contents and literary style of the book. Rather, one distinct copy forms the center of attention: stolen from a public library, tattered, and with mustaches drawn on the illustrations. While this copy of *The Gadfly* is clearly a site where knowledge is produced and contested, the location of the novel within another fictional text and the reading / poaching undertaken by the various fictional characters, turn the ensemble of the text and its various intertexts into a transtextual space (and a transcultural space, given the wide geographical distribution of the points of origin of the intertexts). Transtextual space is imaginary as it is built from the assumptions, interpretations, and readings of individual readers. Transtextual space, however, arises from the concrete physical manifestations of the texts that readers have in their hands. These material objects function as a site of knowledge and, at the same time, as a more or less virtual web of texts that they access through these texts.

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